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ABSTRACT

Strategies to enable blacks to achieve access, choice, and parity in higher education under the aegis of accreditation are suggested. It is noted that educational requirements or standards are directly or indirectly set by accrediting agencies. The following recommendations for accrediting agencies are offered: accrediting agencies should involve more blacks from all types of higher institutions in their activities; evaluation teams should review the institution's commitment to equity in enrollment and employment; blacks should be represented on evaluation teams; and guidelines should be developed for the evaluation of black colleges as well as for the multicultural/multiracial elements found in other colleges. Suggestions for blacks in predominantly black and predominantly white colleges include: be familiar with the political and other unintended uses of the accreditation process for the purpose of improving their relative position with other educational status groups and power elites; seek broad participation in all facets and levels of the accrediting process; develop systematic planning procedures that include continuous evaluation and self-assessment to assure continued access and choice; and assist in the development of self-study documents. (SW)

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# IMPLICATIONS OF ACCREDITATION FOR PROMOTING ACCESS, CHOICE, AND PARITY FOR BLACKS IN HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE UNIQUENESS OF HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES

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Accreditation is generally considered a public expression of an accrediting agency's confidence in the ability and effectiveness of an educational organization or program to meet its objectives. Further, this function in the United States has been usually reserved to private, voluntary regional accrediting bodies for colleges and universities. Specialized programs in higher education are similarly accredited by private bodies.

Accreditation per se in the U.S. has profound implications for all of higher education and is subject to varying interpretations by its surveyors, users and the general public. Normally, most persons associate accreditation with "transfer of credit"; eligibility for state, federal and private funding; and prestige. More recently, emphasis has been placed on more qualitative concerns - accountability, institutional integrity, probity. However, there are differing perceptions regarding these issues. Added to this malaise is the fact that accreditation has several unintended uses, such as political, economic and social.

As with other segments of the population, the importance of accreditation - and the influence which it exerts - is often overlooked by Blacks in higher education. Ironically, this oversight may be caused by

diversion of Blacks' attention and energy to what are considered more basic concerns, such as access, choice and parity.

However, these same basic concerns may somehow be dependent upon the accreditation process for resolution. First, take the example of a prominent educator and researcher on accreditation issues who states that "one of the surest ways to control for quality is through admissions".[1] In itself, such a statement cannot be discounted; however, when one reads on, the implication for Blacks and other previously bypassed persons is clearer. He continues by suggesting that "Society's commitment to equalitarianism is now united with institutions' need to sustain enrollments". While it is true that some colleges and universities are extending access to more Blacks (as nontraditional students), this does not mean that equity and quality are mutually exclusive. On the other hand, this same researcher is on target when he indicates that minimal quality in institutions of higher education can be assured when accreditation increasingly emphasizes exit standards or outcomes.[2] All institutions, including historically Black colleges, must increase their effectiveness in assessing outcomes. Further, "these exit standards cannot be different as the institutions are different if any common meaning for degrees is to be retained".[3]

Regarding the quality of Black higher education

and the access of Blacks to higher education, the International Encyclopedia of Higher Education observes: "...the standards of education offered at the Negro colleges and universities have been questioned ...some modern critics continue to argue that the academic standards and educational ambiance of the typical Negro college are inferior to those of the typical white college."[4]

The statements themselves are so laden with subjective judgments, preconceived notions, false assumptions, and racial overtones about the Black college that no defense is really the best defense. This kind of thinking which the statements evoke suggests even more strongly that historically Black colleges must demonstrate their real effectiveness through the accreditation process by providing qualitative and quantitative data on outcomes. If such institutions are to remain as a viable choice for Blacks seeking an alternative, then the historically Black college must maintain high standards while at the same time holding steadfast to its mission. To do otherwise would be for these institutions to forsake some of their traditional and worthwhile objectives. It is just as important for Black colleges to be viewed in the proper context when undergoing evaluation as it is for colleges with a traditional Catholic, Jewish or Polish perspective. The fact is that Blacks have been so discriminated against in the past and Black colleges

have been so ignored or underrated that more opportunity must be given if these institutions and individuals are to achieve parity eventually with the white power elite. If this is true, how can we suggest a framework for analysis which provides greater understanding of the issue and some action plan to ameliorate current conditions?

## What Framework for Analysis?

The impact which accreditation has on Blacks generally and historically Black colleges in particular can be described best by using organizational theory. Specifically, the conflict theory derived from Weber[5] serves as the conceptual framework for this paper. Stated briefly, this theory of educational stratification involving status groups assumes that: "Educational requirements may....reflect the interests of whichever groups have power to set them."[6]

Further, while the success of organizational elites in controlling their subordinates is quite variable, it is also true that opposing power from below is weakened when the subordinates acquiesce in the values of the organizational elite. Thus, it can be theorized that accrediting agencies are organizational elites which have the power to set standards of quality. These same requirements, nonetheless, really reflect the interests of colleges and universities which form the organizational elite in the first place. Even more interesting

though is the fact that the organizational elite (i.e., the accrediting agency) is controlled by a predominantly white power structure, thus rendering the small number of Black institutions practically powerless to effect change. Consequently, these subordinates who might otherwise be opposing powers from below quickly yield to the values of the real power elite.

Because there are differences in life situation based on power position, one could conclude that Blacks in higher education may be allowed access, choice and/or parity depending on the action of the organizational elite described here as the accrediting agency. In other words, accreditation implications for promoting access, choice and parity for Blacks in higher education will be determined by policies and practices of the particular accrediting agency as well as the extend of Black involvement in policy decisions at all levels.

## Toward What Purposes?

Realizing, then, that Blacks must work through the organizational elite to achieve their purposes, certain strategies might be followed in order to achieve these specific objectives for Blacks in higher education generally and the historically Black colleges and universities in particular:

1) Ensuring that the mission of the historically

Black college is not severly altered (i.e. changing its complexion and traditional purposes).

2) To provide real access (not revolving door syndrome) to all higher educational institutions, including those which are predominantly white through equitable admissions policies.

3) To preserve the diversity and pluralism of institutions in higher education.

4) To assure equitable participation for Blacks at all levels in the higher education community.

These objectives can be achieved in large measure through strategies developed and implemented by accrediting agencies, historically Black colleges and other Blacks in predominantly white college or university settings.

## What Can Accrediting Agencies Do?

First of all, what more should the accrediting agencies do to promote access, choice and parity for Blacks in higher education? We have already conceded that educational requirements or standards are either directly or indirectly set by these agencies. For example, accrediting agencies regularly require that member and candidate institutions have admissions policies which are consistent with their goals and objectives.[7] Thus, there would be some assurance that Blacks and other students recruited would not only be

admitted, but would have the advantage of relevant and meaningful programs and services, and subsequent success. In evaluating a predominantly white institution, tne accrediting agency would assure itself that such an institution which actively recruits and enrolls Black students be required to offer programs and services consistent with the needs and interests of all students.

These same agencies might promote choice by insisting that the historically Black college live up to its stated mission. There must also be insistence that these colleges adhere to universally accepted standards in the academy, within a not-to-be-ignored Balck cultural context. While the uniqueness of the historical Black college must be considered in the evaluation and accreditation process, the Black college must never be allowed to adhere to second-rate standards and procedures.

If equity for Blacks is to be achieved, then access and choice for students, faculty and administrators must be a priori factors to be addressed in the field of accreditation. Simply put, Blacks must be in evidence in larger numbers and in strategic positions on student bodies, faculties and staffs of colleges and universities.

It is a practice of accrediting bodies to draw its volunteer resource persons from the ranks of faculty and administrators in member institutions. Since most evaluation assignments require that individuals be

"experienced", this means that institutions must actively engage Black members of their faculties and staff in institutional assessment and evaluation prior to submitting their names to accrediting bodies as potential evaluators.

Specifically, accrediting agencies must -

-involve more Blacks from all types of higher education institutions (including historically Black colleges) in their activities. That would mean more Blacks on accrediting commissions, governing boards, evaluation teams. Steps would be taken to identify qualified Blacks to be trained for leadership roles as team chairpersons, consultants and special visitors, rather than relying solely on the college president (who is usually white) to nominate deserving and competent Black individuals;

-admonish evaluation team members to review the institution's commitment to equity in enrollment and employment in consonance with the college's own stated objectives. While the team members should not be prescriptive in their recommendations, the team report should contain recommendations reflecting the team's assessment of progress in the institution's own affirmative action program as well as its commitment to minority clientele and staff;

-provide teams with specific instructions on the assessment of higher education equity programs when colleges and universities are visited (cf. document entitled

"Programs for Educational Equity: Schools and Affirmative Action" published by U.S.O.E.);

-send teams to historically Black colleges which are representative of the unique needs and characteristics of these colleges. In addition to needed Black presence and competence, attention must be given to specialized and developmental considerations in order that the team's report will be realistic and creditable;

-must make a conscious effort to include Black representation on all evaluation teams;

-develop special guidelines for the evaluation of historically Black colleges and extant multicultural-multiracial elements found in other colleges. Such guidelines would supplement existing standards and would be similar to those already in use for proprietary post-secondary institutions in the Middle States region[8] and those developed by the National Study of School Evaluation for Secondary Schools;[9]

What Can The Colleges Do?

In like manner, Blacks in either historically Black colleges or predominantly white colleges should:

-become familiar with the political and other unintended used of the accreditation process for the purpose of improving their relative position with other educational status groups and power elites.

-seek broad participation in all facets and levels of

the accrediting process, including membership on institutional self-study steering committees; representation at regional and national accreditation conclaves; membership on accrediting governing boards, commissions, special committees; membership on and chairmanship of evaluation teams; serving on the executive and administrative staffs of accrediting bodies; and contributions to the literature on accreditation, with particular emphasis on the participaton of Blacks and other minorities;

-develop systematic planning procedures which include continuous evaluation and self-assessment to assure continued access and choice;

-develop or assist in the development of self-study documents which demonstrate an enduring commitment to the highest level of quality and achievement of unique objectives;

-identify and recommend to accrediting agencies highly competent Black professionals for training as evaluators;

-carefully review evaluation team rosters for their institutions to assure that the needs and interests of Blacks will be protected. Further, Blacks should express strong objection when there is no Black presence on an evaluation team;

-assist accrediting agencies in the development of policies and guidelines which may directly or indirectly affect access, choice, parity, or institutional uniqueness in higher education.

While these strategies are by no means the only avenues for Blacks to achieve access, choice and parity under the aegis of accreditation as practiced in the United States today, they will result undoubtedly in greater progress toward these goals. Let's conclude by reiterating that "...if increased opportunity for higher education is not to be a sham and a delusion for minority people, it must be accompanied by equal opportunity to participate fully in every aspect of American life."[13] Certainly, this includes accreditation and its implications for promoting access, choice, and parity for Blacks in higher education and the uniqueness of the historically Black college!

January 1984

## FOOTNOTES

1. John Harris, "How Do You Know A Good College When You Stumble Over One?", in Current Issues in Higher Education (Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 1979), p.36.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. "Access of Minorities: Blacks in the United States", in The International Encyclopedia of Higher Education, ed. Asa S. Knowles (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1977), p.65.

5. "A Conflict Theory of Educational Stratification", in American Sociological Review, Vol. 36, p.1008.

6. Ibid., p. 1010.

7. MSA/Commission on Higher Education, "Characteristics of Excellence in Higher Education", (Philadelphia: 1977), p.9.

8. MSA/Commission on Higher Education", Considerations in the Evaluation of Proprietary Postsecondary Institutions", (Philadelphia, 1978).

9. National Study of School Evaluation. Evaluation Guidelines for Multicultural/Multiracial Education (Arlington, Virginia: NSSF, 1973).

10. "Inequality of Opportunity for Higher Education". American Sociological Review, Vol. 36, No.5 (October, 1971) p. 805.